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SUBJECT: FEEDBACK FROM THE BALTIC COUNTRIES ON THE FY 2008
OPERATIONAL PLAN PROCESS

REF: RIGA 318

¶1. We would like to thank posts for their hard work in completing FY 2008 Operational Plans (Op Plans). This was the first year your posts completed Op Plans, and we appreciate the efforts that went into this process.

¶2. The Op Plan process is a key aspect of the Secretary's foreign assistance reform, providing a comprehensive, interagency picture of how resources received by posts will be used to support assistance objectives and the transformational diplomacy goal. This new process gives the Secretary and the Department the tools to strategically allocate resources to improve effectiveness, impact, efficiency, and coordination. By providing details on proposed activities, tactics, and results, the Op Plan process provides the Department with the information needed to refine and defend resource requests, inform the allocation of appropriated funds, and explain to the Secretary, Congress, OMB, and the public how the United States is fostering progress in specific countries and toward achieving regional and global objectives. To achieve these goals, the Op Plan process must be comprehensive, covering all State Department and USAID programs managed both by Washington and in the field.

¶3. We appreciate posts, feedback on this year's Op Plan process. While we have made major changes to the Op Plan process since its pilot year for FY 2007, including significant reductions in the amount of data collected and a streamlined review process, we continue to seek ways to improve the process so as to both gather the data necessary for the Department and minimize the burden on our posts and USAID missions. This includes continuing to evaluate whether we have struck the right balance for posts managing only limited security assistance programs.

¶4. Realizing that posts going through the Op Plan process for the first time would experience difficulty, we took measures that would minimize the burden for posts:

-- In August 2007, all posts were asked to identify an Op Plan coordinator who would be responsible for the development of post's plan, coordinating the work of the country team, and interfacing with Washington staff on guidance, troubleshooting, and questions (STATE 115037). We believe that posts that did not identify coordinators until late in the process had more difficulty completing their Op Plans. Without identified coordinators, it is not clear that tailored guidance and other assistance intended to make the Op Plan process easier reached the appropriate staff at posts when it would have been most helpful.

-- Given that posts around the world manage foreign aid portfolios of widely divergent scales and complexities, we recognized from the outset that a one-size-fits-all approach would not be appropriate. Therefore, we provided supplementary guidance for partner countries receiving only

military assistance (FMF and IMET). This guidance was developed by the Bureau for Political-Military Affairs, with input from the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), to assist Security Assistance Officers, Defense Attaches, and Political-Military Officers at post in completing an abbreviated Op Plan for countries receiving only FMF and IMET assistance. This guidance was available online and provided to posts in mid-March.

-- Lastly, every post was assigned a point of contact in the Office of the Director of U.S. Foreign Assistance to help posts navigate the Op Plan process. To the extent that posts had difficulty in preparing their submissions, had questions on guidance, or required assistance with the Op Plan software, they were strongly encouraged to take advantage of this resource. Additionally, Office of the Director of U.S. Foreign Assistance staff held widely publicized weekly conference calls in the month leading up to the Op Plan submission deadline to help posts work through issues arising with their plans.

15. As difficult as the preparation of the Op Plan has been for many posts, we appreciate posts, support for the Secretary's goal of integrating assistance with policy goals and ultimately providing better accountability to the taxpayer. We believe that, having gone through the process for the first time this year, posts will find it an easier exercise in future years. But we will continue to look for ways to ease the burden on posts and stand ready to provide both improved guidance and direct technical assistance as necessary.

16. Finally, we should note that the inclusion of SEED 'graduate' countries in the annual SEED report will be ended, starting with the FY 2008 report. As a result, the three Baltic posts will not be required to contribute to this annual report this fall or in future years.

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